

THE STATE OF MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE AND PROSPECTS FOR ITS DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: This article deals with issues related to administrative services and the performance of municipalities. The topic has been subject to continuous debates in terms of the efficiency of the services which local authorities provide and the prospects for improving the process. The focus of the research is on work processes at the level of local administrative services, while its aim is to identify the major challenges which municipalities are facing and suggest possible measures for improvement. To accomplish this, a questionnaire for conducting an online research was designed. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions and was sent to 265 respondents, which is the number of municipalities in Bulgaria.

The analysis made for the purposes of this research is based on the formal data submitted by 60 municipalities on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria. The findings of the analysis helped us identify possible solutions for improving the monitoring and designing of work processes, updating provided administrative services and raising their efficiency as the basis for developing integrated electronic administration.

Key words: administrative services; work processes; information technologies.

JEL: H7, C8.

Introduction

Improving the quality of administrative services is a strategic goal of and a major challenge to any municipality. Diversifying the manner in which

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administrative services are provided and focusing on their digitalization is an important prerequisite for raising their efficiency and reducing the time and costs required for their delivery to citizens and businesses. The major aim of this research is, based on an empirical survey, to analyse and summarise good practices in terms of describing and designing work processes at a local authorities level so as to use them as a starting point for the provision of administrative services. This can be achieved by fulfilling the following tasks: designing a questionnaire focused on local administration work processes; identifying solutions for modelling and optimizing those processes and relating them to provided administrative services as a basis for studying and improving the efficiency of administrative service; conducting an empirical survey among selected municipalities; analyzing the findings of the survey and formulating proposals for improvements.

The findings of the survey can be used as a starting point for designing and implementing specific policies and mechanisms for streamlining work processes, and hence, locally provided services as an element of raising the efficiency of administrative service.

1. Theoretical Background

The underlying principles of public administration and administrative services were defined in the Public Administration Development Strategy 2014-2020. The Strategy relates functionally to other strategic documents, such as the e-Governance Development Strategy, the Central Government Decentralisation Strategy, the Strategy for Supporting the Development of Civil Organisations in Bulgaria, etc. As the strategy points out, there have been a number of accomplishments in terms of priority axis 3, 'Quality administrative service and development of e-Government' over the last years. Some of the major results, which relate directly to the subject of this research, include developing IT platforms for enhancing the interoperability of spatial data and services to be used by government administration and citizens; deploying software for making online payments for electronic administrative services; designing a basic model of providing complex

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administrative services; developing a methodology for improving work processes in terms of delivering administrative services, etc.

The significance of information technologies, concepts and solutions for improving public sector governance has been growing over the last years. New technological solutions have been designed to expand the opportunities for providing new administrative services, their digitalisation and improving administrative service in general. Therefore, making an adequate IT solution largely depends on the findings of a comparative analysis. As Kirilov (2016) points out, conducting a comparative analysis should be approached from two basic aspects, i.e. in terms of the feasibility of analysed software solutions and in terms of the set of features that will be compared. Milev (2017) emphasizes that IT systems are increasingly becoming an integral element of organizations and their successful governance. He defines an IT system as a set of people, technologies and an organisation, whose aim is to collect and process certain input data and generate information for users. Other authors also rely on employing an increasing volume of data to design research-based approaches for measuring administrative capacity. In a research conducted by Borisov (2019), the author states that the capacity of territorial administrations is generally higher in terms of their autonomy and independence from the central government; in terms of the budgeting process; awareness about the nature of financial management and control systems; established culture of sharing knowledge within the organization and ensuring access to public information. The increasing volume of information available on the Internet and user expectations to be able to use certain remote administrative services easily and quickly, challenges local administrations to constantly identify and implement different policies and mechanisms for improving and digitalizing administrative service. One of the latest researches in the field, conducted by Milev (2018), suggests an overall concept for improving the monitoring process in public organisations and identifies specific technological aspects of its implementation.

To accomplish the aim of this research, it is essential to distinguish between administrative service and administrative services since administrative service also refers to the provision of other types of services in addition to administrative ones (Fig. 1).

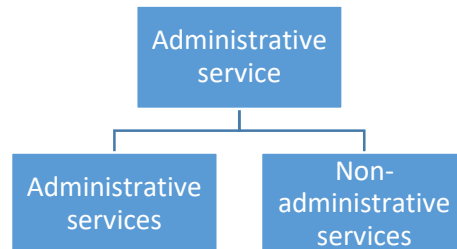


Figure 1 Administrative service and administrative services

Administrative services are provided in result of executing certain administrative processes. It is therefore essential to point out that work processes (business processes) within public sector entities go beyond the scope of administrative service. Examples of processes that are typical of administrative service include:

- Submitting a request for registering local administration on an internet portal;
- Submitting a request for having an administrative service provided;
- Providing an administrative service;
- Providing a requested document and replying to the person requesting a service, etc.

There are numerous examples of processes which are internal to organisations and do not relate to the provision of services. Those are processes related to the development of municipal administration staff; accounting and financial processes, etc. All those processes require employing unified approaches of description and modelling; unifying and reengineering their structure, etc. The description, analysis, modelling and optimization of work processes in municipalities, as a prerequisite for improving the quality of provided administrative services, entail certain risks. Those risk factors need to be analysed and accounted for when designing and implementing an overall policy and selecting specific software tools. As Kirilov (2017) states, for a large share of electronised public sector projects, it is both essential and obligatory to employ a software solution in risk management. This research supports the thesis that the digitalization of administrative services is a complex and serious task that requires continuous monitoring and risk management.

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A number of research works, strategic and draft documents also focus on the need to redesign municipal work processes in order to raise the efficiency of administrative service. There are examples of very good practices in the field both in larger and smaller municipalities, which proves that the subject of our research is up-to-date and that such trends should be promoted further.

2. Empirical Survey of the Administrative Service Provided at Present

The empirical survey was conducted by designing an online questionnaire referring to various aspects of the description, modelling and re-engineering of work processes and administrative service. The basic tasks of the survey were accomplished at different stages. Those tasks included studying the applicable regulatory framework; designing a questionnaire which consisted of 12 questions; sending information to respondents; having the questionnaire completed and submitted; analyzing and summarizing collected data. The questionnaire was accessible online during the period of conducting the survey. Figure 2 presents a snapshot of the main page of the questionnaire.

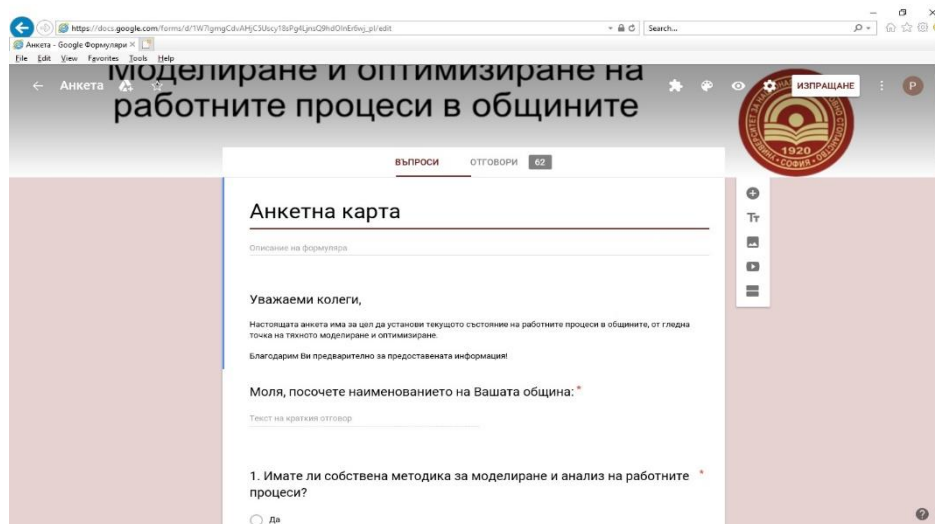


Figure 2 A snapshot of the main page of the designed questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of the following questions:

- Have you designed your own set of methods for modelling and analyzing work processes?
- How often do you analyse work processes in your municipality?
- Do you use a software product to model and analyse work processes?
- How do you analyse the needs of your administration in terms of improving work processes?
- Do you employ a system of key indicators that provides prompt and detailed information about the implementation of processes related to the provision of administrative services?
- How often does administrative staff meet to analyse information about the time and costs it takes to deliver administrative services?
- What is the share of administrative services whose overall implementation is the responsibility of certain employees, i.e. those employees are in charge of the entire process?
- What is the number of processes that were optimized in 2017?
- What is the number of updated administrative services in result of optimizing work processes in your municipality?
- What is the number of new administrative services provided in result of optimizing the work processes in your municipality?
- What is the number of employees in the municipal administration that are involved in describing and modelling work processes?
- Do members of municipal staff require some training after having work processes reengineered?

The empirical survey was conducted at the end of 2017. An email with a description of the survey and a link to the questionnaire was sent to the official e-mail address of each municipality in the Republic of Bulgaria, i.e. to 265 municipalities. We had 62 questionnaires completed and submitted by 60 municipalities, since two of the municipalities in the sample had completed the questionnaire twice, their answers being identical both times. Therefore, the number of answers in all figures that are presented further is 62. The respondents (i.e. 60 municipalities) are grouped in 25 administrative

districts (none of the municipalities in district Gabrovo or district Montana submitted a completed questionnaire). The empirical survey we conducted thus included 22.73% of all municipalities on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria in 89.28% of the district centres.

3. Major Findings of the Survey

The major findings of the survey were analysed by taking into account the relationship between questions referring to the same topic. Figure 3 presents the shares of positive and negative answers to the question whether the municipality has its own set of methods for modelling and analyzing work processes. The darker area in the pie chart shows the share of positive answers.

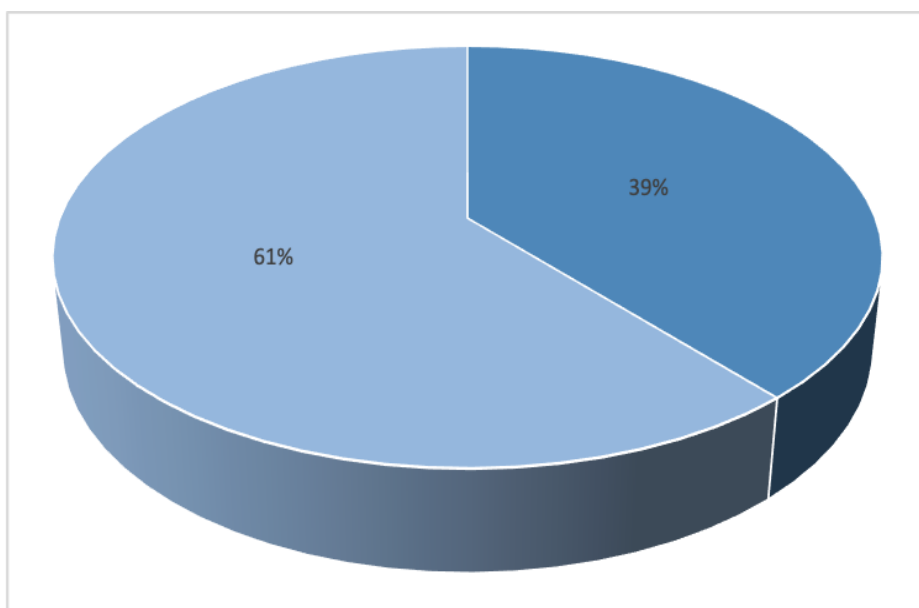


Figure 3 The share of positive and negative answers to the question: 'Have you designed your own set of methods for modelling and analyzing work processes?'

The answers of the respondents indicate that in 38.7% of the cases, municipalities use specifically designed sets of methods for describing, modelling and analyzing the work processes in the municipal administration. In the majority of cases, though, i.e. in 61.3% of the cases, such methods are not available or employed. The availability of methodological tools is not sufficient for regularly employing the different approaches for analysis of work processes to identify opportunities for their reengineering. Our survey therefore sought to identify the frequency of conducting such analyses.

Figure 4 presents the findings of the survey in terms of the second question in the questionnaire that referred to the frequency at which municipalities analyse their work processes.

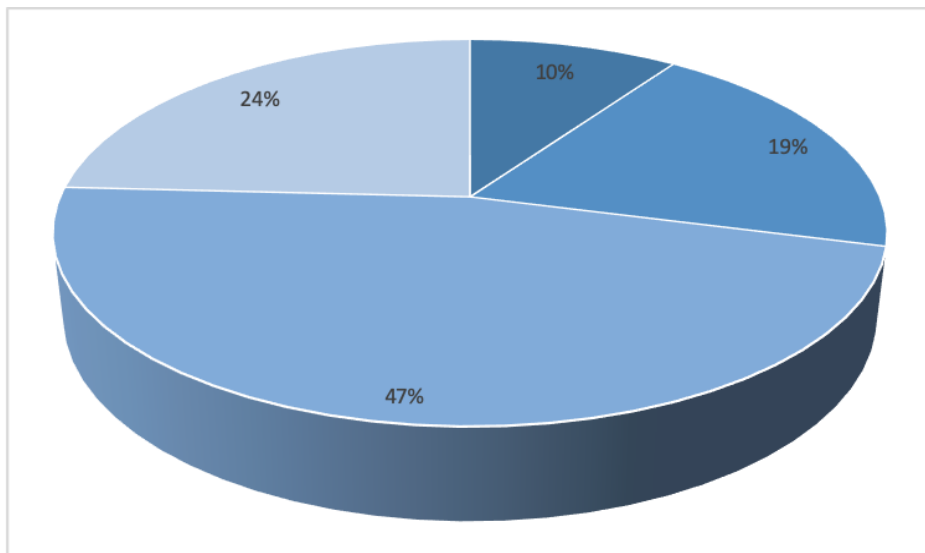


Figure 4 The share of answers to the question: 'How often do you analyse work processes in your municipality?'

As the pie chart indicates, the largest share of municipalities, i.e. 46.8% of the respondents, analyse their work processes once a year. This is quite logical since some of the regulatory basis (for example, the part related to municipal budgets, local taxes and charges, etc.) is changed on an annual

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basis or a basis close to that. The share of municipalities that conduct an analysis of the work processes related to administrative service every month 9.7%, while 19.4% of them do so every six months, that is, their total share is 24.6%. It is an alarming fact that the share of municipalities which analyse their work processes only once every few years is nearly as high – 24.2%, and in some cases, this is extremely insufficient.

Analysing and modelling administrative work processes requires that specific software tools should be available and employed. The fifth question in the questionnaire referred to the use of a specific software product. Figure 5 presents the findings of the survey in this aspect, the dark segment of the pie chart indicating the share of positive answers.

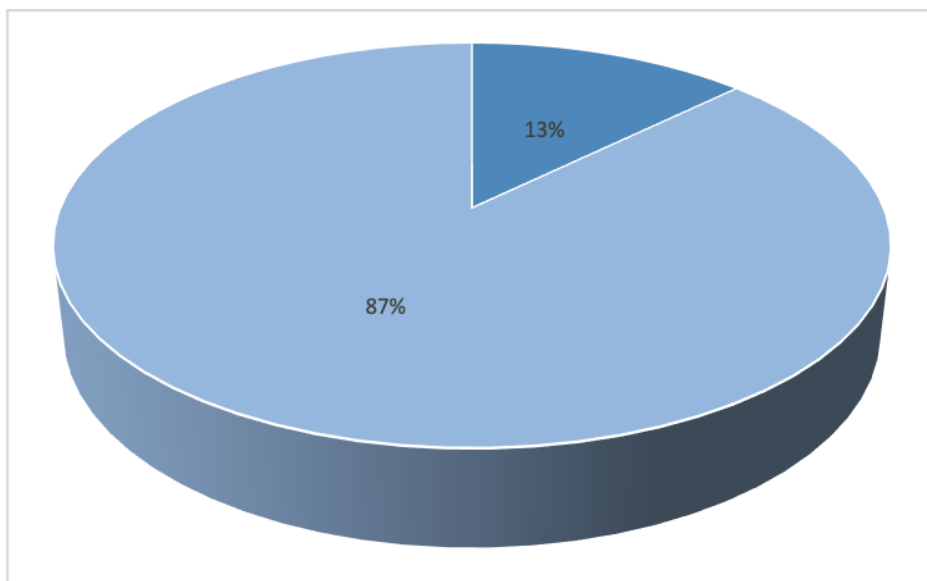


Figure 5 The share of positive and negative answers to the question: ‘Do you use a software product to model and analyse work processes?’

Clearly, a very high percentage of municipalities (87.1% of respondents) do not use any specific software for modelling or analyzing work processes. Such software products are only used by 12.9% of the

respondents, which is extremely insufficient. It is essential that the reasons behind that situation be identified – they could be organizational, financial, qualification-related issues, etc. Some of the further questions seek to identify some of those reasons.

Figure 6 presents the relative share of different answers to the question about the improvement of work processes as the basis for raising the efficiency of local administrative service. We should note that the respondents gave more than one answer to that question, therefore the total sum of different shares exceeds 100%.

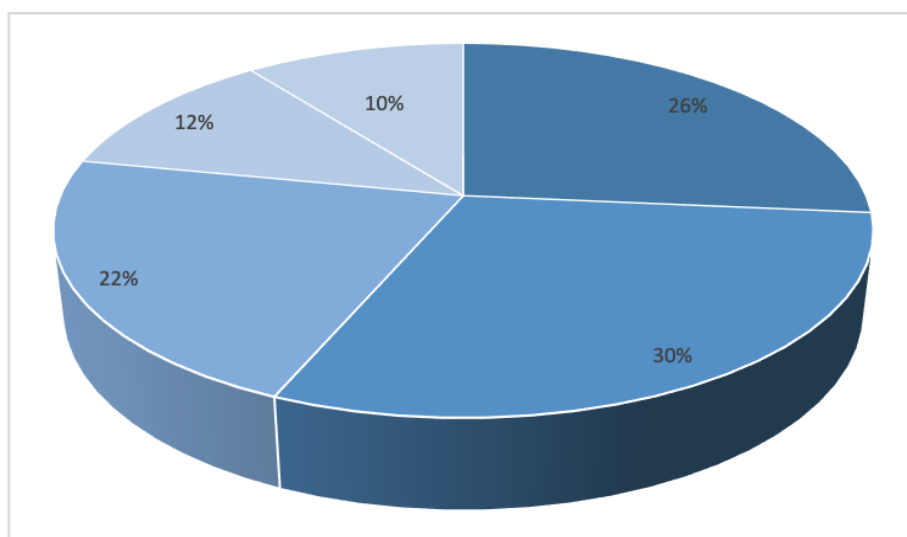


Figure 6 The relative share of answers to the question 'How do you analyse the needs of your administration in terms of improving work processes?'

As the pie chart indicates, in 37.1% of the cases, the needs of municipal administrations in terms of improving work processes are analysed through analysis of stakeholders, by identifying persons or organisations that have an interest in activities related to the analysis and re-design of work processes. In a large number of cases (41.9%), though, the needs of local administration are analysed by making a comparative analysis of a specific

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situation or process with other structures within or outside the administration. Methods, such as organizing work sessions with participants in the processes to generate ideas, approaches or possible solutions or engaging experts and experienced managers to hear their opinion about expected results are less frequently used – in 30.6% and 16.1% of the cases, respectively. As little as 14.5% of the respondents do not conduct any need analysis of the administration to improve their work processes.

The analysis of work processes within the administration may be approached as a starting point for designing basic models and data warehouses for providing information to the decision-making processes within any organisation, including in municipal administrations.

The focus of attention of this research is, therefore, on the design and deployment of key indicator systems. Figure 7 presents the shares of different answers to the question about the availability and deployment of such a system. The dark segment indicates the share of positive answers.

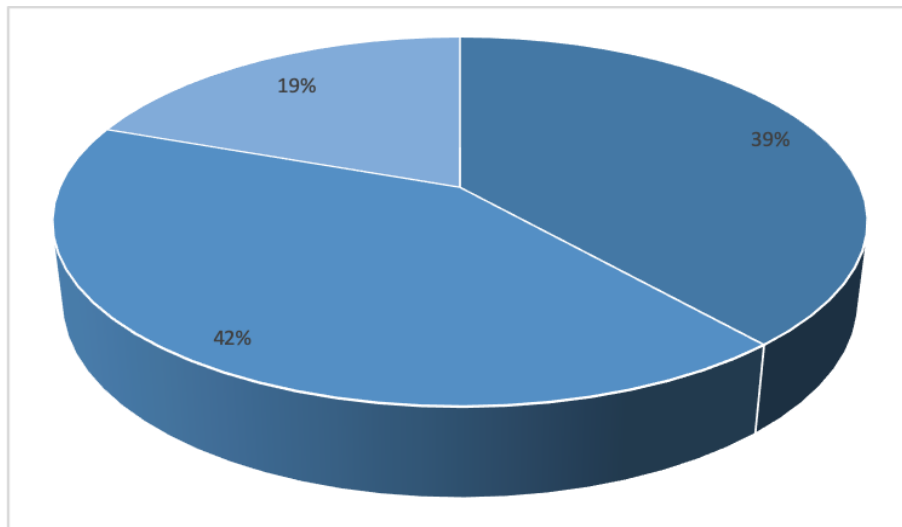


Figure 7. The relative shares of answers to the question: 'Do you deploy a system of key indicators that provides prompt, detailed information about the implementation of processes related to the provision of administrative services?'

As figure 7 indicates, 41.9% of the municipalities which took part in the survey do not have or deploy a system of key indicators and 19.4% of respondents are in the process of developing such a system. It is promising that 38.7% of municipal administrations have already designed and are deploying systems of key indicators to evaluate administrative service and governance.

The employment of key performance indicators is one of the methods for measuring efficiency. Although it is more frequently used in the private, rather than the public sector, it could be an essential tool for evaluating the accomplishment of organizational goals via defined key indicators and performance metrics. The latter relate directly to work processes within organisations (while in the private sector, the term 'business processes' is used), and hence, to data sources.

Since the issue of work processes is large in scope, in this survey the term is used to refer to work processes in terms of provided administrative services as an element of local administrative service. The focus of this research therefore is on the analysis of the frequency at which information about provided administrative services is gathered (see figure 8). The darker segment indicates the share of respondents that constantly gather such information.

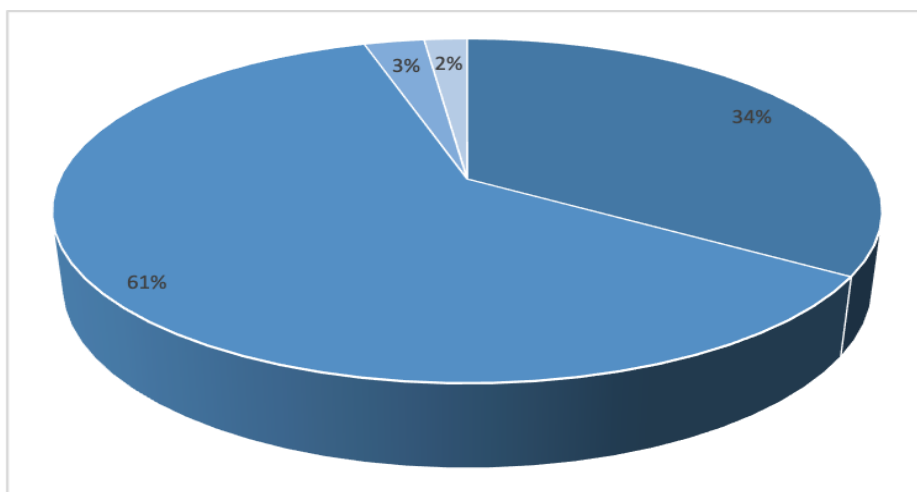


Figure 8. The relative shares of answers to the question: How often does administrative staff meet to analyse information about the time and costs it takes to deliver administrative services?

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The answers we received from respondents indicate that municipalities collect and analyse data about the time they spend and the costs they incur to provide administrative services as part of their policy for improving administrative service and raising its efficiency. This is a regular practice in 33.9% of the cases, and in 61.3% of the municipalities – only when a specific situation requires to do so. Such situations could be delays in execution, the absence of the employees who are in charge of the provision of services, etc.

From a managerial perspective, the assignment of different functions and tasks to the employees within an organization is part of their job descriptions as well as an element of organizational structure. At the same time, it is essential to ensure employee substitutability in cases when they take time off work, use a paid leave, suffer temporary work disability, etc. Strictly assigning the implementation of work processes to specific employees (process owners) may seriously obstruct the provision of administrative services as part of municipal service. Therefore, one of the questions asked in the survey referred to the degree to which work processes relate directly to specific employees. Respondents' answers are graphically presented in figure 9, the darkest segment indicating positive answers.

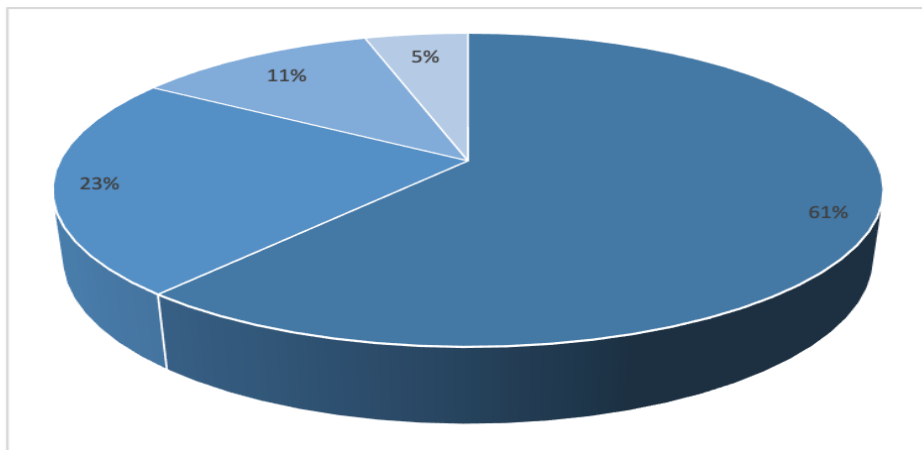
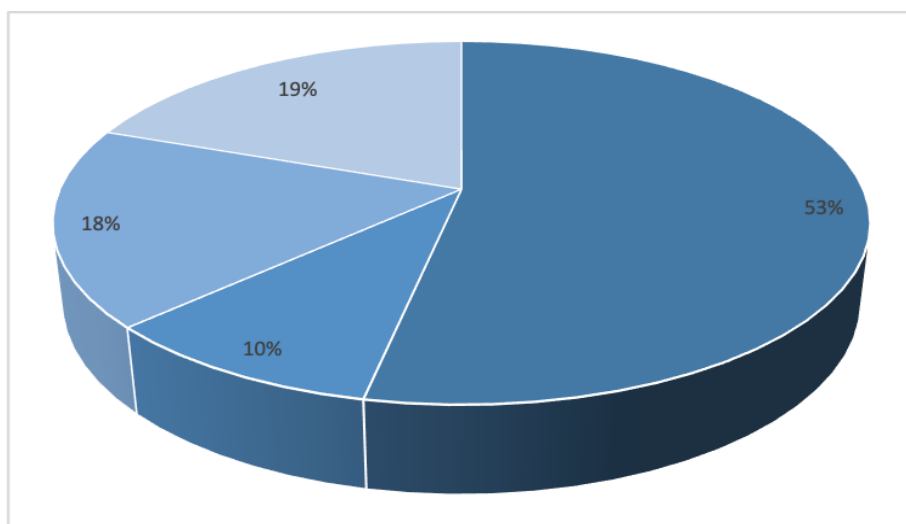


Figure 9 The relative shares of answers to the question: 'What is the share of administrative services whose overall implementation is the responsibility of certain employees, i.e. those employees are in charge of the entire process?'

As the pie chart shows, in 61.3% of the cases, municipal administrations clearly designate the employees who are in charge of the overall execution of a process (process owners). In 22.6% of the cases, this is so for the majority of processes, and in 11.3% - for more than half of the processes.

Figure 10 illustrates the shares of different answers to the question about the number of processes which were optimized in the municipality during the year the survey was conducted (2017).



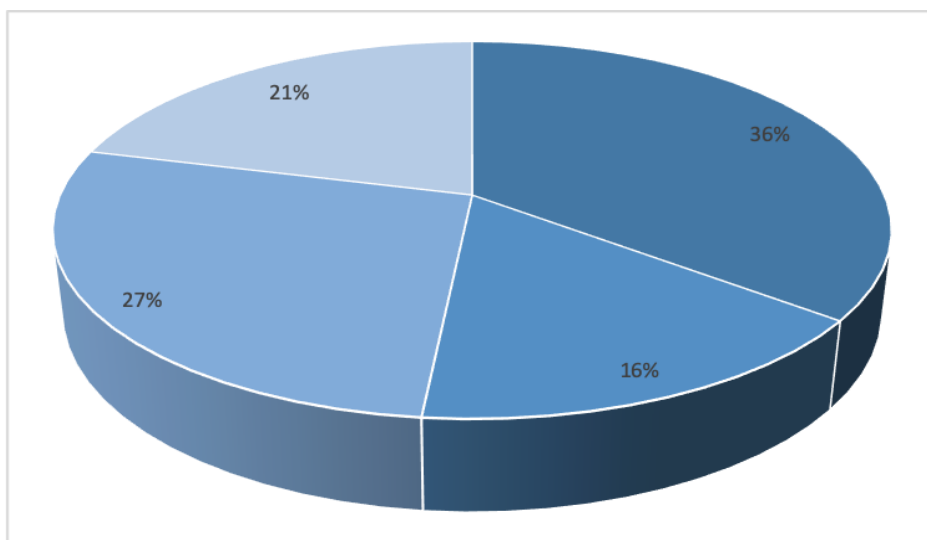
*Figure 10 The relative shares of answers to the question:
What is the number of processes that were optimized in 2017?*

In 53.2% of the cases, the number of optimised processes over the analysed period varied from 1 to 5 (the darkest segment of the pie chart). We should note that in 19.4% of the cases, no processes were optimized; in 9.7% of the cases, their number ranged from 6 to 10, and in 17.7% of the cases their number exceeded 10. It would be difficult to make any strict recommendations based on that data, since in order to do so, we would also need to analyse in detail which processes were optimized and what led to their optimization. In general, since the regulatory framework is constantly

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subject to amendments both in terms of municipal budgets and in terms of local taxes and charges, it is necessary to constantly re-assess, analyse and optimize work processes in order to provide more efficient administrative services and reduce the costs of administrative services. The optimization of work processes is a major component of governance especially in larger municipalities, where the number of provided services is very high.

Theoretically, any change in work processes should directly relate to consequent changes in provided services. The findings of the survey indicate a different situation, though (see figure 11).



*Figure 11 The relative shares of answers to the question:
What is the number of administrative services in your municipality that have
been updated in result of optimizing work processes?*

While in 53.2% of the municipalities, the number of processes which were optimized over the researched period ranged from 1 to 5, the number of updated services varied from 1 to 5 only in 35.3% of the cases. The situation was similar in terms of the other answers – in 16.1% of the municipalities that were included in the survey, the number of updated

services in result of optimized processes varied between 6 and 10, while in 27.4% of the municipalities, more than 10 services were updated. No services were updated in 21% of the municipalities.

Changes in and optimization of work processes affect directly both the provision of already existing services, and the design of new ones. The findings of the survey indicate that in this respect, there are either no new services provided by municipalities, or their number ranges from 1 to 5. This is graphically presented in figure 12, the lightest segment representing the share of municipalities which have not upgraded their services.

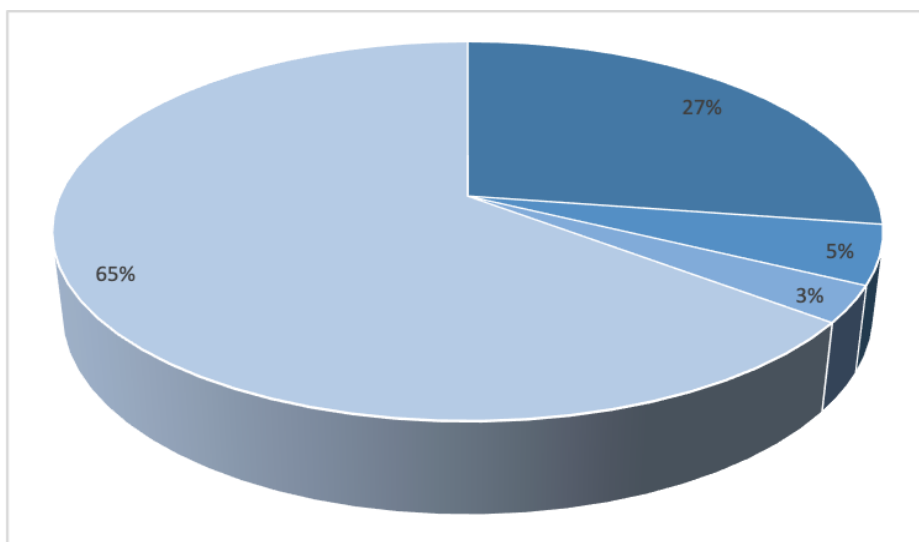


Figure 12 The relative shares of answers to the question: What is the number of new administrative services provided in result of optimizing the work processes in your municipality?

In nearly two-thirds of analysed municipalities, i.e. in 64.5% of the cases, no new services were provided over the researched period. In 27.4% of them, the number of new services provided is between 1 and 5. A possible explanation is the lack of strong commitment on behalf of municipal employees or the insufficient number of employees to be engaged in the

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analysis and optimization of work processes. The findings of the survey are graphically presented in figure 13, where the darkest segment of the pie chart represents the share of municipalities in which the number of employees engaged in designing and modelling new processes ranges from 1 to 5.

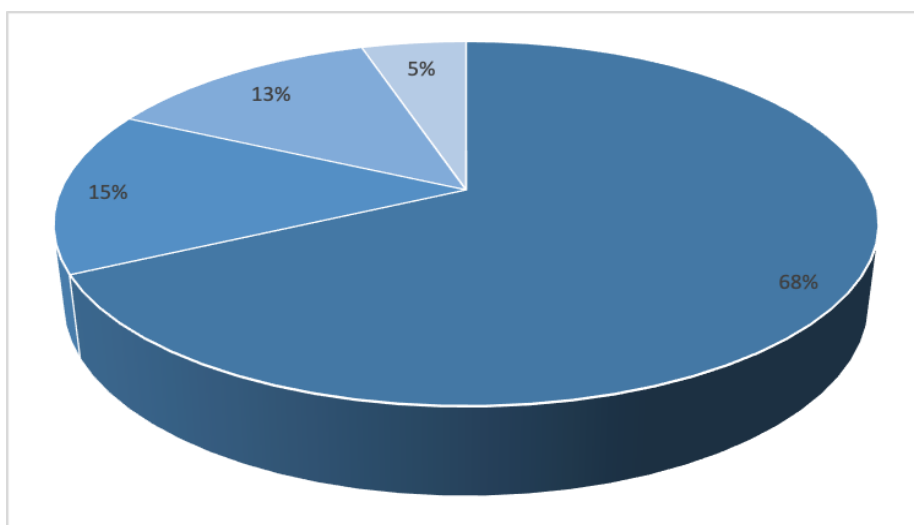
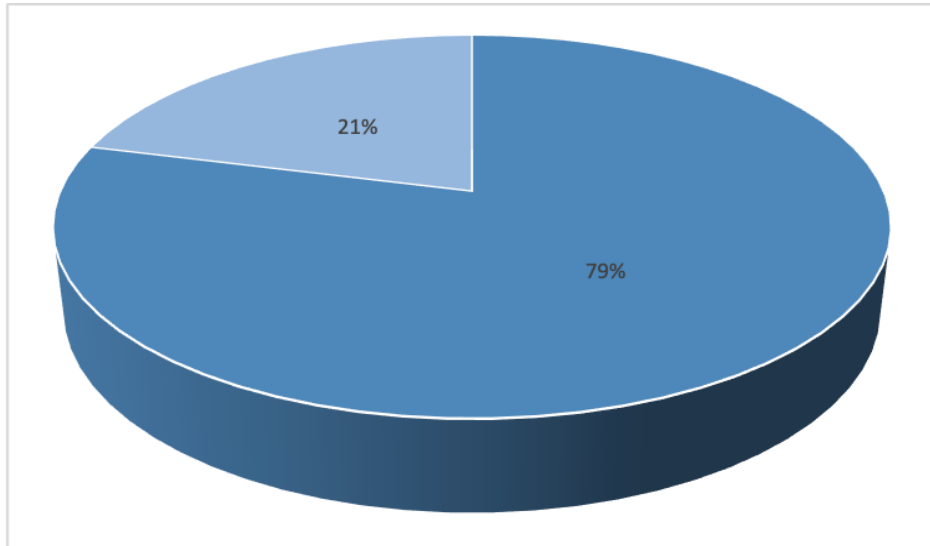


Figure 13 The relative shares of answers to the question: What is the number of employees in the municipal administration that are engaged in designing and modelling work processes?

As the pie chart shows, in more than two-thirds of the municipalities (67.7%), which are predominantly smaller administrations, there are only one to five employees who are engaged in designing and modelling new services. In 14.5% of the municipalities, mainly large ones, this number ranges from 6 to 10, and in 12.9% of the municipalities, more than 10 employees are responsible for designing and modelling new services.

Clearly, municipalities need to organize trainings for enhancing the competence of the employees engaged in designing and optimizing work processes. This is supported by the answers which respondents gave to the last question in the questionnaire (see figure 14). The dark segment of the pie chart indicates positive answers.



*Figure 14 The relative shares of answers to the question:
Do members of municipal staff require some training after having
the work processes reengineered?*

According to provided answers, in 79% of the municipalities employees need some training after having their work processes reengineered, while in 21% of them such training is not necessary.

The findings of the survey indicate that municipal administrations which completed and submitted the questionnaire take significant effort and allocate resources to constantly improve their work processes and administrative service, a trend that needs to be further consolidated in future.

Conclusion

In result of the survey we conducted and the analysis of its findings, it is possible to formulate the following conclusions and recommendations:

- Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria need to constantly implement a policy of analyzing, modelling and optimizing their work

processes as the basis of their digitalisation;

- It is essential to identify the relationship between optimized processes and the design of new administrative services, or the re-engineering of existing ones, including their electronisation;

- It is advisable that local and national funds and programmes ensure the necessary funds for training administrative staff on issues related to work processes, the design and deployment of their own methods for managing those processes, and the development of sustainable policies for employing key management indicators, etc.

The implementation of these, as well as other relevant measures, is going to produce sustainable results in terms of improved administrative service and better performance of local administrations.

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- Introduction – it should be from half a page to a page long. It should state the main ideas and/or objectives of the study and justify the relevance of the discussed issue.
- The main body of the paper – it should contain discussion questions, an outline of the study and research findings/main conclusions; bibliographical citation and additional notes, explanations and comments written in the footnotes.
- Conclusion – it should provide a summary of the main research points supported by sufficient arguments.
- References – authors should list first references written in Cyrillic alphabet, then references written in Latin alphabet.
- Graphs and figures – Word 2003 or Power Point; the tables, graphs and figures must be embedded in the text (to facilitate language correction and English translation); Font for numbers and inside text – Times New Roman, 12 pt;
- Formulae must be created with Equation Editor;

5. Citation guidelines:

When citing sources, authors should observe the requirements of **APA Style**. More information can be found at: <https://www.uni-svishtov.bg/default.asp?page=page&id=71#jan2017>, or: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>

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